

EUROPE

Abuses of Young Refugees in Denmark Reflect Perils Across Europe

By MARTIN SELSOE SORENSEN DEC. 20, 2016

LANGELAND, Denmark — The first of the asylum seekers, five shy African boys, arrived in July 2014, just days after the authorities on this small Danish island were granted permission to open a shelter for children.

Local organizers hurriedly opened as many as 20 shelters housing more than 3,200 refugees, an act that blended humanitarian generosity with an economic lift for the poor community, as the new shelters drew millions in government subsidies.

But it was too much, too fast. Two years later, Langeland's network of shelters has been riddled with problems and abuses, including arson, fights, rape and sexual molestation.

The scandals have called into question the wisdom and motivations for such a rapid expansion. But they have also pointed to dangers across Europe, where many countries have been similarly ill prepared for the surge of migrants and the large numbers of unaccompanied minors among them.

“Across Europe, child protection systems are failing children on the move,” Sarah Crowe, a spokeswoman for Unicef in Geneva, said when reached by telephone. “There is an assumption that everything is under control when they arrive on the European shores, “but it’s actually just the beginning of a new phase of their journey.”

In November, Unicef reported that 22,775 unaccompanied minors had arrived in Europe from Africa since January. That is close to double the number in 2015. It found serious problems in the care of asylum-seeking children across Europe.

“In parts of Germany, some of the centers for families are not suitable for children,” Ms. Crowe said. “They fall victim to violence and abuse and the staff lacks proper training. We are working to harmonize the standards.”

Human Rights Watch expressed similar concerns in June about Swedish asylum center operators. French and British authorities also came in for criticism of their care of unaccompanied children at the vast migrant camp, known as the Jungle, in the French port of Calais.

The European Union’s Criminal Intelligence Agency, Europol, said in January that at least 10,000 unaccompanied minors had gone missing after arriving in Europe.

Presumably, they have fallen through the cracks of the asylum systems of various countries, or reunited with family or friends, but what exactly has become of many of them remains a mystery.

The lesson of Langeland, some now concede, is that caring for vulnerable child migrants and refugees fleeing conflicts in places like Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea requires special skills that many staff members at asylum centers do not have.

On Langeland, two employees at a center in the village of Tulleboelle are charged with having sexual intercourse with minors — akin to statutory rape in the United States — and having engaged in other sex acts with seven young refugees, ages 16 to 18.

At a different center, Praestekaergaard, also operated by the Langeland municipality, as many as 12 refugee children may have been victims of sexual abuse by other refugee children. The abuses happened last year, but did not become public until this November.

Today, Ulrik Pihl, who ran the asylum program, has been relieved of his duties, after criticism that he did not inform the Danish Immigration Service of the

episodes, even after they were reported to the police.

In November, the government announced that Langeland and another municipality would be barred from hosting unaccompanied minors in the future.

“I very clearly want to dissociate myself from the abuse,” Mr. Pihl said in an interview. He regretted not promptly informing the authorities, but insisted the problems were unavoidable.

“I don’t think we could have prevented it,” he said. “There wasn’t anything in the police records of those employees.”

Yet Mr. Pihl acknowledged that, facing high numbers of new arrivals and many new centers in a hectic period of fast growth, he had no time to educate staff members.

“A large part of the staff had a background in pedagogy, but none had practical experience of this sort at all,” Mr. Pihl said, recalling the difficulty of finding qualified people.

“Of course, I thought to myself, What on earth did we agree to?” he added. “But I didn’t for a moment think we wouldn’t be able to do it.”

Rather, Mr. Pihl said the city council sensed opportunity when it agreed to quickly expand the number of shelters, hoping that the influx of migrants could stimulate the local economy.

Before the refugees arrived, Langeland, home to about 12,500 people and 130 miles from Copenhagen, was burdened by a lack of jobs and a steady bleeding away of its population to other parts of the country. That changed when the refugee numbers grew.

“The unemployment rate in Langeland dropped from 8 percent to 4, and there’s one reason for that: the asylum centers,” Mr. Pihl said.

In 2011, Langeland hosted one asylum center, for families, with 29 employees. By April of this year, the centers had grown into a full-fledged department that

employed 358 people and had a turnover of 300 million Danish crowns (about \$43 million).

But for the municipality, it proved to be too much to handle, particularly when it came to unaccompanied, war-damaged minors demanding special care that Langeland could not immediately offer.

“Caring for children with trauma is not a common thing in a peaceful country like Denmark,” Kuno Soerensen, a psychologist from Save the Children, said when reached by phone.

“I don’t think we have staff with the necessary skills, and that’s a challenge,” he added.

A memorandum from the municipality on the episodes at the Praestekaergaard center acknowledged that the facility had “way too few staff,” but added that more funding had arrived from the Danish Immigration Service to address that.

Government documents obtained by Denmark’s Radio24syv revealed that the national Immigration Service had received repeated warnings from the Danish Refugee Council, a nongovernmental group, of mistreatment of children by staff members as early as December 2014.

The warnings cited suicidal tendencies among some children, and said that staff members had awakened children by spraying cold water on them or by removing a mattress from underneath them. But the warnings were followed up by just a single phone call to the Langeland municipality, the documents said. Last week, the government said it is going to strengthen the supervision of asylum centers.

On a recent afternoon, the only light burning in the offices of Langeland’s town hall was that of Kurt Habekost, the recently appointed temporary asylum director.

“I’ll concede that we’ve been too slow on the uptake,” he said, referring to the training of staff members at the shelters. “But when you establish a center in 48 hours, it’s going to take some time to educate the staff.”

“Perhaps we should have paid more attention with the children’s facilities,” he conceded. “But recruiting is difficult because most people know it’s a temporary job.”

With the troubles, and fewer asylum seekers arriving in Europe now, eight of Langeland’s centers have closed, seven will close in the coming months, and 82 staff members have been dismissed.

Still, Mr. Pihl defends the overall achievements of Langeland’s asylum centers.

“We have an agile organization and can open a children’s center in three days,” he said. “We can manage the administration to pay salaries, hand out the pocket money and feed the asylum seekers. We’ve streamlined those processes and become a model for other operators.”

“There is no such thing as a thornless rose,” he added. “When Denmark nationally hosts 20,000 asylum seekers there will be fires, fights, rape and crime, because that would also be the case among 20,000 Danes.”

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